

If you are feeling low, discouraged, or lonely, this simple meditation can be very supportive; you can construct, for example, a web of allies, a web of guardians, a web of companions, or even a web of love.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Seeress:

Divining Through Deep Intuition

— Thorbiorg's Seance —

We have considered some of the beliefs and practices of our ancestors which address the capacity for intuitive living. This valuing of the ability to open our ways of feeling and thinking to a broader and deeper reservoir of experience than can be carried in our conscious processing went further even than everyday levels of ability, for the tribespeople of early Europe had individuals who had been selected, divined, chosen by the spirits, trained, initiated, for the express purpose of being able to enter deeply into the intuitive mode. They were men and women. But those who specialised in using, directly, deep intuition in order to be able to see into the future, were almost always women (men more often used spellcasting for this purpose). Seership of this kind was considered, in ancient Europe, to be a feminine power, used on occasion by men, but essentially practised by women.

A thousand years ago, in Iceland, an account was written of the work of one of these women; it is one of the most vivid descriptions of early European shamanic ceremonies and affords some detail in envisioning her divinatory rituals, and in gaining a closer understanding of the gift of deep intuition.

The saga *Erik the Red*, written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century in Iceland, depicts the lives of people during the so-called 'saga age' of 930–1030.¹ It includes an account of a seeress named Thorbiorg. The saga is set in Greenland, but historians think it likely that the shamanic tradition documented in the tale thrived in Norway in the tenth century and before. It is possible that Thorbiorg was a historical person. In the account it is clear that she was widely renowned; she was nicknamed Little Sibyl, and was known as the last

of a group of nine 'sisters' who were all seeresses, and who journeyed around the country offering advice from the spirit world.

In the saga Thorbiorg is performing divination seances during a great famine. The year preceding her visit had been one of critical food shortages; men who had gone out sealing and fishing had come back with very little and, because of bad weather, some had not returned at all. Late that winter the leading farmer of the area, Thorkel, was given the responsibility of inviting Thorbiorg to prophesy when the terrible famine would end. Many of the local community gathered in his farmhouse, and 'A good reception was prepared for her, as was the custom when a woman of this kind should be received.'

Thorbiorg's appearance was dramatic: she wore a black lambskin hood, unusually lined with white catskin, a long cloak, and catskin gloves which were furry and white on the inside. Shaggy calfskin shoes were laced with long leather straps ending in big brass balls. She carried a tall staff adorned along its full length with brass, and topped with a brass knob surrounded by 'magical' stones.

She removed her cloak to reveal a blue tunic, fastened at the front by leather straps, and sparkling with precious stones all the way down to the hem. Around her neck glowed a necklace of glass pearls, and around her waist a tinderbelt from which was suspended a large animal-skin pouch in which 'she kept the magical stones, feathers, implements and objects of her craft'.

Thorbiorg was greeted with great ceremony. She was served a specially prepared ritual meal created from 'the hearts of all living creatures obtainable', along with a porridge of goat's milk. She ate with her own implements: a brass spoon and copper knife with a hilt of walrus teeth, clamped together by two rings around the handle. Afterwards, she explained that she needed to sleep in the house overnight before embarking on the seance.

Preparations for the spirit seance were completed the following day, and by evening everything was ready, including a ritual 'high seat' topped by a cushion which had to be stuffed with hen feathers. At the appointed time, 'Master Thorkel took her by the hand and led her to her special seat.'

She asked if there was anyone in the hall who could sing the necessary charm to bring the spirits, and at first it appeared as if no one knew the necessary spells. But a young woman called Gudrid knew. 'I am unversed in magic, nor am I a prophetess,' said Gudrid, 'but Halldis my foster-mother taught me in Iceland the chant which she called Varthlokur.'

'Then you are wise in good time,' said Thorbiorg.

'But this is a kind of proceeding I feel I can play no part in,' protested Gudrid, 'for I am a Christian woman.'

'Yet it might happen,' said Thorbiorg, 'that you could prove helpful to folk in this affair, and still be no worse a woman than before. But it is Thorkel I must look to, to procure me the things I need.'

Thorkel, the host of the seance, persuaded Gudrid to help Thorbiorg. The women formed a circle around the platform on which Thorbiorg was seated, the men around the edge of the room. Gudrid recited the chant so beautifully and well that 'no one who was present could say he had heard a chant recited by a lovelier voice.' The seeress thanked Gudrid for the song, said that it was sung well, and that 'those which before would have turned away from us and given us no hearing; but now there are many matters open to my sight which before were hidden both from me and from others'.

When she was ready, Thorbiorg said that she was prepared to answer questions, for the answers had been given to her by the spirits. According to the saga, the farmer asked her about the outcome of the famine and accompanying plague.

'I can easily see many things that were previously hidden both from me and others. I may say that this year of dearth will not last longer than this winter; in the spring everything will be better. The plague, which has been raging for a long time, will cease sooner than you think.'

Then others asked about personal fortunes and misfortunes, possibilities, troubles, anything they wanted, and Thorbiorg answered all the questions. For example, in reply to one young woman who had enquired about her fate, Thorbiorg replied, 'I now see thy fate clearly. Here in Greenland thou shalt get that marriage which is the most honourable, although it will not be lengthy, for thy ways go to

Iceland. And from thee will come a kindred which will be both great and good, and over thy descendants there will shine a bright light. But now, farewell, and good luck, my daughter.'

The saga manuscript says that she was most willing to impart information, and concludes with: 'and it was only a little that did not happen of what she said.'

— The Women Diviners —

This wonderfully detailed account of an ancient ritual shows Thorbiorg undertakes the divination on behalf of the community, as well as individuals. She contacts the spirits in order to gain knowledge concerning the destiny of the people gathered in the farmhouse.

Certainly, all through the heritage of ancient Europe, such women who possessed the powers of deep intuition, of reading the future, were honoured and revered. The tradition was a long one, and we have written records of it stretching back in time at least a thousand years before Thorbiorg.

The Roman historian Tacitus, writing in the first century AD, recorded many valuable observations about the lives of the indigenous peoples living at the frontiers of the Roman Empire.² He sums up the attitude of some of the tribes succinctly, writing: 'They believe that there resides in women an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy.' Divination of this kind was originally, in the culture of Wyrð, a mystery known especially to women. Certain women had the capacity, the gift, of being able to receive inspiration from the powers beyond the earthly realm, and they were very greatly honoured for this talent. Tacitus writes: 'In the reign of the Emperor Vespasian we saw Veleda long honoured by many Germans as a divinity; and even earlier they showed a similar reverence for Aurinaia and a number of others.' This esteem obviously went beyond mere fame or social and political status; these seeresses were regarded as sacred.

Veleda was a famed seeress of the tribe of the Bructeri in the Rhineland, where she practised her divinatory arts nearly two thousand years ago. She 'enjoyed extensive authority', Tacitus writes, 'according to the ancient German custom which regards many

women as endowed with prophetic powers, and as the superstition grows, attributes divinity to them.' The name Veleda is from 'veles', 'seer', a word related to the Irish 'file', 'poet', and it is likely that these were sacred, shamanic names pertaining to their spiritual attainment, as the Celtic Merlin was the name awarded to the most highly acclaimed wizard-shaman in the romantic literature that has followed from the early traditions of that tribal culture.³

The Roman writers explain that Veleda's enormous popularity among the Germanic tribes was largely due to her divinatory visions which predicted the outcome of battles, and especially her foretelling of the unexpected German destruction of the Roman legions in the German revolt of AD 69. Incredibly, when the Romans wanted to agree peace terms with the Bructeri, it had to be done through Veleda. The representatives sent by the Romans were not allowed direct access to the seeress, who remained isolated, sitting in a high tower constructed for the purpose of her divination: 'One of her relatives chosen for the purpose carried to her the questions and brought back the answers, as if he were the messenger of a god.'

We have this invaluable information about Veleda, but she was by no means unique; in early Europe, many tribes venerated such female seeresses, and Roman chroniclers made references to others including Ganna, a priestess of the Semnones, and another 'wise woman' of the Chatti tribe.

The term used for such women in ancient northern Europe was 'spakona', meaning 'a woman with prophetic gifts'. A more precise term for a woman practising divination was 'volva' usually translated 'seeress', and for this there is no masculine form. The divination rite in which the volva took part was known as 'seidr'. The etymology of the word seidr connects it with the large group of terms based on the Indo-European root 'sed': a seidr, then, was literally a seance; a 'sitting' to commune with the spirits.⁴

In the saga of *Erik the Red*, Thorbiorg was said to be the last survivor of a company of nine women, and the sagas elsewhere present the seeresses going about in groups. Possibly at an earlier time than that represented in the sagas isolated seeresses were less common.

The rites they carried out were bound up with the fertility of the

land and also with the rearing of a family and the giving of young girls in marriage. It is a tradition in which women were able to participate fully, both as celebrants and as audience. But it went much further than that, for the practice of seidr magic was reserved for women only, and presided over by the goddesses Frigg and, especially, Freya. Both appear at times as the beneficent goddess helping women and girls at the times of marriage and childbirth, as well as shaping the destiny of children. Freya's name is specifically linked by Snorri Sturluson to a special kind of witchcraft known as 'seithr', for he states that she was a priestess of the Vanir who first taught this knowledge to Odin — an event we shall consider later. The volva were really spirit mediums on missions from the goddess Freya, the earthly representations of her great power.

We are told of one volva in the story *Landnamabok* who is said to have worked sorcery so that a sound should fill with fish, which means that she took an active part in the bringing of plenty to the land. The seeresses thus sometimes went beyond divination, and mediated the power that created new life and brought increase into the fields, among the animals, and in the home. They brought also the power to link people with the unseen world. Besides divining concerning the fruits of the earth and the baby in the cradle, they also offered wise counsel granted through divination concerning worldly events. And they offered also the collective experience of sacred ceremonies where the spirits revealed mysteries, and the power of Freya was incarnated for all the participants to witness.

— The Seeress's Art —

The account of Thorbiorg's seance contains a number of interesting objects and processes, a kind of structure through which work could be undertaken in the divinatory arts. They represent a template upon which we may see the way we are living our life in regard to the divinatory impulses within us.

THE POUCH

The saga reports Thorbiorg as having a tinderbelt from which was suspended a large animal-skin pouch in which 'she kept the magical

stones, feathers, implements and objects of her craft'. In *The Mound People* archaeologist P. V. Glob describes a prehistoric Scandinavian medicine pouch (a millennium older than that of Thorbiorg but perhaps relating to the practices of Veleda and other early seeresses), noting that thirty of these bags have been found in Bronze Age Danish graves. They must have been similar to the pouch strapped to Thorbiorg's belt. Glob lists the contents of one bag, which gives us an impression of the sorts of items Thorbiorg might have been carrying:

Inside the bag were the most extraordinary objects: a piece of amber bead, a small conch shell . . . a small cube of wood, a flint flake, a number of different dried roots, a piece of bark, the tail of a grass-snake, a falcon's claw, a small, slender pair of tweezers, bronze knife in a leather case, a razor with a horse's head handle . . . a small flint knife stitched into an intestine or bladder, a small, inch-and-a-half-long leather case in which there was the lower jaw of a young squirrel and a small bladder or intestine containing several small articles . . . the contents of the bag had been used for 'sorcery or witchcraft' and had in fact belonged to a medicine man.⁵

This fascinating collection of objects is in essence the tools of the trade; combined with the knowledge, intelligence, skills of the practitioner, they add up to a way of working with deep intuition. Some of the tools are probably of immediate practical benefit: the 'slender pair of tweezers', for example, could be for making things, or for extracting injurious materials from the skin of a patient. The 'small flint knife' stitched, presumably for safety, into a bladder bag, might also have been of direct practical importance.

But the others are resonant with symbolic meaning, with magical action, and with connection to the spirit world which is the medicine man's Otherworld: the piece of amber bead, for example, does not have an obvious practical use, but may have been part of the paraphernalia of a spell, and amber could have had properties important to the healer. Since it had been constructed into a bead, with a hole drilled through it, the piece of stone had already been intervened with for some purpose or other; alternatively it may have been from the personal decoration of someone important, significant in the healer's life.

The small conch shell may have been for listening to, for hearing

voices and advice from the spirits; the small cube of wood may have been from a tree of particular significance, a tree struck by lightning, a tree with which the healer feels an affinity and gains power from, a tree which represents the World Tree, the structural image which joins together the spiritual worlds of the Upperworld and the Lowerworld with the world of everyday reality, Middle Earth. The piece of bark may have had a similar connection, and could indeed have been from the same tree as the cube of wood.

The different dried roots were presumably either for the power of their connection with the plants from which they were extracted, or may have had a direct benefit in being used to make drinks or potions, perhaps from scrapings of the root mixed with water or other substances.

The tail of the grass-snake, the falcon's claw, the horse's head handle on the razor, the lower jaw of the young squirrel: all these could have symbolic referents. The World Tree, for example, has in its classic image a squirrel scurrying up and down its length, crossing between the world of Lowerworld, Middle Earth and Upperworld, exchanging insults between the bird of prey (falcon) which stands on its highest branches, and the serpent (snake) which devours its root. These three objects could have been talismans of the World Tree, along with the piece of wood and bark, all adding up to the calling card of a Wyrd shaman.

This is all speculation, of course, and does not directly relate to the objects in Thorbiorg's bag. But there are plenty of parallels when we remember that her bag is reported to have magical stones (the amber bead), feathers (relating to the falcon's claw), implements (like the tweezers, flint flake and small flint knife) and objects of her craft (objects of her status, her role as a diviner, and perhaps corresponding with the World Tree objects I have just outlined).

The bronze knife in a leather case could have had simple practical usage, although it is intriguing to remember that Thorbiorg had a special copper knife with a hilt of walrus teeth, clamped together by two rings around the handle. The saga account says that the point of the blade has been broken off, possibly in a different sort of ritual. In the Anglo-Saxon *Spellbook*, a short charm to protect against being

'shot' by invisible arrows from elves also requires the use of a knife with a yellow horn handle, and mounted with three brass nails. This implement, too, might be similar to the special knife with which Thorbiorg eats her ceremonial meal, with the walrus teeth representing the same defensive, weaponry function as the brass nails.

All this paraphernalia, easily carried in a leather pouch attached to a belt, sums up the calling card, the essential implements, the weapons and sacred objects of the seeress's, or shaman's, mission. Working practically with deep intuition, making the realm of the inner imagination manifest for the purposes of healing or otherwise, required these special objects.

THE RITUAL MEAL

When she arrives, Thorbiorg is served a ritualistic meal, devised to intensify animal-spirit power. Stephen Glosecki's translation of the narrative indicates that the meal included not goat's milk, but rather colostrum, a sustenance more concentrated than ordinary milk, full of antibodies as well as nutrients, secreted for a few days after birthing to fortify newborn mammals in the weakest phase of their lives.⁶ He says that the colostrum of goats is yellow-orange, thick, and very strong-flavoured: 'nowadays, at least, people tend to recoil from it.' Along with this drink, Thorbiorg takes as her meat the hearts of all animals in the vicinity. Her eating of the hearts of a variety of wild animals, using her own special implements, suggests that she needed to integrate their essence into herself in order to gain their strength and help in contacting the spirits. Tribal people often consider the heart a source of spirit strength. By imparting animal power, the meal strengthens her for her ecstatic journey.

THE BRASS-KNOBBED POLE

The ceremonial pole carried by Thorbiorg is common in cultures in which the shaman carries a staff which is placed on the ground foot down, knob up, and represents the World Tree.

Carrying a ceremonial pole was symbolic of these journeys. The fact that Thorbiorg's staff was decorated with brass all down the side, ending with a brass knob adorned all round with magical stones, sug-

gests that the brass decoration may depict the journey she makes to the spirit world. The 'magical stones' which decorate the top of the staff perhaps represent the worlds of knowledge of the Wyrd cosmology.⁷

As the symbol of journeying, or 'flying' to the spirit world, the staff also represents a means of flight, a symbol of spiritual transportation. Centuries later in the European female shamanic traditions, when the surviving practices were labelled as 'witchcraft', the witches were depicted as flying on staffs in the form of broomsticks, which for them represented spirit travel.

THE HIGH SEAT

For her divinatory ceremony Thorbiorg was placed on a high seat or stool, and in an account of another ritual it was recorded that one of the volvas was seated when making prophecies, and was very angry when people crowding around her inadvertently pushed her off her seat. Seidr divination rituals invariably employed a high seat for the seeress, probably representing the shamanic flight to the spirit world which she was about to undertake, and placing her in an elevated position from which she could receive visions of worlds beyond.

The volva's journey to the spirit world was often depicted as being like flying as a bird. Thorbiorg's high stool was required to be topped by a hen feather-filled pillow. And Freya, the archetypal shamaness represented by Thorbiorg, was reported in the stories as being able to adopt a 'feather' or 'falcon' shape, and when she flew she shapeshifted into a bird and travelled vast distances. Also, the myths suggest that she had a kind of flying bird shamanic costume which she lent to the male gods so that they could fly.

Sometimes, as the volvas 'flew' to the spirit world by sending their souls out of their bodies, people would claim to have 'seen' them, usually in the form of women with hair streaming out behind them as they flew. But it was a dangerous journey, because if the soul was wounded or killed on its travels in the spirit world, the body of the seeress showed corresponding wounds or even died.⁸

— Singing the Spirit Trance —

In other, more fragmentary accounts of seidr rituals it is implied that the seeress obtained her knowledge while in a state of trance; she was said to gape, to fall down as though dead, to be roused with difficulty, to be utterly exhausted when the ceremony was over, and so on.⁹ In some accounts of similar divinatory rituals, seeresses travelled with a number of singers trained in the incantations necessary for the spirit work. But at the time this saga was set, Christianity was the official religion, and Thorbiorg had no singers with her.

In the early north-west European female tradition, seeresses such as Thorbiorg seem to rely on voice chanting, or song. Another account of seidr describes a lone seeress called Heidr, who travelled to divinatory ceremonies with thirty trained singers, half men and half women, taking this trance-inducing and spirit-catching function to a sophisticated level. The effect of having so many chanters performing in a farmhouse, singers able to exploit the potential of human voice, in range and volume, would be overwhelming. And the soundscape is created live, for the very first and last time in its precise formation; a unique performance which has the immediacy of performance art, rather than the safe, contained effects of a sound trapped in a recording on tape or disc. The singers accompanying shamanesses were chanters.¹⁰ They sang songs in a magical way. The skill of drawing in the spirits depended upon pitching and rhythmically pulsating the air in a manner which enabled the trance-entering of the seeress, and opened the doors of heaven for the entry of other forces.

While the shaman journeyed to the spirit world, and the songs catalysed this transformation, he also needed song to induce a receptive and appropriately creative state of consciousness in the audience, who after all were participants rather than mere observers. It is important that they were 'taken out of themselves' so that the audience became as one, was literally and metaphorically 'in the spirit' of the occasion, in the beginnings of sacred intoxication, and therefore ready to receive the messages to be transmitted by the shaman from the world of spirit.

While the rhythm of drumming or chanting may induce altered

states of consciousness relevant to the rituals being carried out, the words of chants can also carry significance. Hilda Ellis Davidson explains that the title of the spell-song required by Thorbiorg for her ceremony is related to the Scots dialect word 'warlock', or wizard, and the meaning is thought to relate to the power to shut in or enclose.¹¹ She suggests that this might be interpreted in two ways: first, the song could attract and hold the helping spirits who enabled the volva to obtain the knowledge; alternatively it could mean that the song had the power to arouse the volva from her state of trance and summon back her wandering soul from the spirit world to return to the enclosure of her body.

In Thorbiorg's ceremony, the song used was obviously one generally known to elicit the spirits. But in all shamanic traditions, reference is made to songs which are unique to shamans, and which sometimes play a part in their initiation. Certainly they have a quality different from melodic entertainment. German ethnopsychologist Holger Kalweit reports a shaman from a more recent tribal culture describing the way songs take him over, how the words are induced by other forces:

Songs are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices. Man is moved just like an ice floe sailing here and there out in the current. His thoughts are driven by a flowing force when he feels joys, when he feels fear, when he feels sorrow. Thought can wash over him like a flood, making his breath come in gasps and his heart throb. Something like an abatement in the weather, will keep him thawed up and then it will happen that we, who always think that we are small, will feel still smaller. And we will fear to use words. But it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves – we get a new song.¹²

This gives us a glimpse of the experience for Thorbiorg and other volvas of the power of their songs.

In many cases, the spirit songs are connected with the initial experience of spirits which occurs before initiation begins, and it is likely that Thorbiorg must have had at one time such a primary

encounter. And there is invariably a time also when the shaman is able to summon the presence of spirits by a song, even though there may well have been 'involuntary' encounters with the spirits earlier in life. The shaman's role is to mediate between people and the spirit world, and therefore had to include the conscious raising of spirit energies.

To see and hear in a totally different way is what happened in the case of a shamaness from the north early this century, a woman who may well have had a similar shamanic path to Thorbiorg's of a thousand years earlier. She was called Uvavnuk.¹³ Knud Rasmusson, an explorer, heard the story of Uvavnuk's initiation. He reports that one evening she had gone out to pass water. It was a dark winter's evening, and suddenly a shining ball of fire showed in the sky. It came down to Earth, directly towards the place where Uvavnuk sat. She wanted to run away, but before she could do so she was struck by the ball of fire. 'She became aware all at once that everything in her began to glow. She lost consciousness and from that moment on was a great summoner of the spirits. The spirit of the fire ball had taken up residence within her . . .'

Apparently, Uvavnuk went running into the house, half unconscious, and sang a song which since that time became her magic formula whenever she was to help others. As soon as she began to sing, she became delirious with joy, because the people she was seeking to help became cleansed of all that burdened them. 'They lifted up their arms and cast away everything connected with suspicion and malice. All these things one could blow away like a speck of dust from the palm of the hand with this song.'

Rasmusson gives the words of Uvavnuk's song:

The great sea has set me in motion,
Set me adrift,
Moving me as the weed moves in a river
The arch of sky and mightiness of storms
have moved the spirit within me,
till I am carried away
Trembling with joy.

It is clear that this song is a transcending, exhilarating, cleansing, relieving, tension-banishing song full of love and joy. Perhaps the songs sung by Thorbiorg and her trained singers were similar, songs that transcended the entrapment of everyday 'suspicion and malice', and instead induced a sense of love 'delirious with joy'. This is indeed a healing state, as we know from the evidence of complementary medicine in training people to meditate and envision the body healing itself from illnesses.

— Divination Today —

The gift of divination brought by the volva was a mysterious and magical one, essential for an understanding of the forces at work in the world. In subsistence economies, as that of the indigenous Europeans, attunement to the most subtle nuance of weather, crop production, childbirth, health and warfare determined whether or not survival was possible. They were issues of life and death with which we no longer grapple so directly, on a daily basis, in the contemporary Western world. The volvas represented Frigg and Freya, goddess descendants of the Wyrd Sisters, and people paid service and homage to their powers of fertility.

But what of its relevance to us today, a thousand years and more later? Colourful though it seems as a tradition, we no longer place such high value on deep intuition, on 'reading' the future, or so it seems. Should we think differently on this matter? Could we recall the *spakonas* to our society? Should we?

To my mind, it is less a question of reinventing something that supposedly no longer exists, but rather recognising something that takes place all the time, but gets ignored because it is not the rational, logical thinking that we are used to. We are making predictions, prophecies all the time about what is going to happen in the future. The enormous gambling industry across the Western world depends on such judgements, of course, where people are placing bets on their predictions of which random numbers will appear in a lottery, which horse will win a race, which dice will land wherever on a roulette table. All are staking small or large

pieces of personal disposable income on judgements of the future; 'seership'.

Equally, in business, many executives use 'seership', deep intuition, even divination, in their thinking; in projecting sales, in working on commodities markets and in currency dealing, in investment of all kinds. These are realms in which judgements about what will happen are beyond the simple formulae allowed by the processing of information which can be logged. There are too many uncertainties, too many permutations of events, for us to process the likely outcomes, even on computers. We need to make a judgement. Successful business people are usually the ones who manage to do this, although for the most part they will put it down to 'experience', rather embarrassed to lay claim to being good at something as unlogical, unrational, unmasculine as 'intuition'.

But it is in the less acquisitive regions of our personal lives that we constantly practise our seership, our attempts to weigh the outcomes of situations, conversations, happenings and events, courses of action. Our lives are dominated by such continuous activity, and our daily reverie consists largely of rehearsing possible future scenarios, from the simple to the complex. In this context, rational thinking plays but a small part, even though we may convince ourselves, individually and collectively, that we are logically working through the possibilities. In fact, judgements are much more dependent not on tapping the information we have passing through our conscious minds – where we all have a strictly limited ability to process information – but on 'listening' to the processing, below awareness, of information that we have taken in and 'digested'.

Occasionally we all use our deep intuition, our reservoir of inner knowledge which is not directly accessible to the conscious mind, but which is 'in there'. We know things 'in our bones', we can 'feel it in our waters', we 'play hunches' and 'follow our nose', thereby acknowledging the possibility of living more in touch with this deep intuitive power.

If we are inspired at all by Thorbiorg's story, by a culture in which people trusted intuition, then we should consider what the lessons of

the story are. How can we learn from her in dealing with the realm of deep intuition?

I think we can understand more fully how Thorbiorg and her fellow seeresses could envisage the intuitive mode, and were able to take in information from the 'outside' in the way that they thought about the connections between themselves and the rest of the world. They allowed 'outside' information, forces, influences, to come 'inside' them, rather like a medium.

But when the seeresses talk about journeying to the spirit world to gain information, they sound as if they are somehow about to go outside their skin and travel in thin air. This was the depiction of such women several hundred years later than Thorbiorg, of course, when in a Christian Church-dominated Europe they were talked of as 'riding through the sky on broomsticks' while their physical bodies lay in their houses in a sleep so deep that they seemed to be in a trance, or a coma.

The essence of the way in which we encounter this idea is the relation we have with the boundary of our selves and the world around us. In the Web of Wyrd exercise we were depicted as having an extended psychological self. And if you think about it for a moment, it is quite possible there is at this very instant someone, somewhere in the world, thinking about you; so you are not only in the physical location where you are reading this book, but also somewhere else, at least as a psychological presence.

This sense of being an extended presence can go further than the merely cognitive. The descriptions of shamanic journeying in tribal societies are physical ones, a sense that the body is really being left behind, bringing another dimension to the extended sense of self. The sensation of filling more space than just our physical body, of experiencing something more akin to the space we fill psychologically, was surely only a part of what Thorbiorg did, but it is an entry to her world, a small step outside the limiting visions of our own.

For most of us the sensation of operating from a centre within the physical body is paramount. We think of ourselves as an individual entity quite separate from everything and everybody around us. We live according to the assumption that our identity is coterminous

with our body, and that 'I' am 'in here' while everyone else is 'out there'. This viewpoint is so deeply ingrained in the way we are brought up that it conditions every other perspective we develop in life. It comes as a shock when we hear of people who believe it could be otherwise, that the self can exist outside the body, as we did in ancient Europe.

Our sense of a 'self' located in the head is for most of us the control box from which we live, from where we make decisions about our behaviour. This sense of self dominates – it is thought of as in a proprietorial capacity relative to the rest of the body. We speak, for example, of 'my arms' or 'my legs' as if they were somehow separate from, but owned by, the self. Yet the self cannot escape the body. We are limited by physical boundaries. And because this body-bounded view of our selves is so fundamental, it underlies all other aspects of how we live.

At the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London I explored the process of extending the sense of the body boundaries in a meditation with an actor called Kirsten Hughes. She lay on her back in the middle of a very large rehearsal room, her eyes closed. I talked her through a relaxation procedure which slowed her breathing, relaxed her body and cleared her mind. Each succeeding breath becomes slower and deeper than the one before.

I asked her to imagine that with each succeeding breath she was taking in a colour, any colour she chose. With each intake of breath a ball of the coloured light formed in her body; a bright, vivid ball of light at her centre, the core of her energy, her body, her mind. This psychological process, in which a colour visualisation concentrates the mind, is a very effective meditation.

I then asked Kirsten to imagine a pebble being dropped into her ball of colour, as if into a pool of water. Ripples spread out and around, and the colour passed through her skin and gradually spread around the room. She continued to breathe deeply and strongly. The colour ebbed and flowed until it filled a huge space outside her body. She continued to work, to breathe, until the colour filled the complete interior space of the theatre. The colour, I suggested, was her extended self. The room was filled with her energy. Her body

and my body were inside her extended self. We were both inside her.

At this stage I asked Kirsten to stand up, but keeping her eyes firmly closed. Taking her by the arm, I led her around a tour inside her newly extended self. She discovered the environment, the space, inside an extended self. It is huge. We walked faster. Her eyes were tightly shut, and I was leading her at a good walking pace, and I asked her to begin reporting to me her sensations – where it felt warm, where cold. And to tell me when she felt she was passing through the centre of the space, from where her energy had arisen.

Kirsten began to feel at home inside herself. She was striding around confidently in the space. I let her arms go and she walked with no guidance, safe because she was not walking in alien territory. Everywhere she went was space that was hers. Her self. No longer confined by her body. Extended. Expanded. Exhilarated. The boundaries were stretched. Until she walked near a wall and I shouted 'Stop!' for her boundaries of self were now coterminous with the huge room rather than with her body. Then she set off in a different direction, continuing the voyage inside Kirsten.

Eventually, she began trotting across the space, her eyes still closed. I guarded the edges and shouted when she was in danger. She was running inside herself. She ran again, and again, faster. Soon she was running at high speed across the room, with me to meet her near the boundaries. It was terrifying and thrilling to watch. And the sense of exhilaration and liberation that came from her running uninhibited, blindfold, in extended inner space, was incredible. She was ecstatic. Her feeling of freedom, of influence, of taking in so much more, of being able to see further, even with her eyes closed, was vivid.

Eventually, I guided Kirsten back to the centre of the room. She lay down again, and I directed her breathing back to normal. Shortly afterwards she had to leave to go straight on to a rehearsal for the production she was in. Her fellow actors, who knew nothing of her experience of an extended self, told her they were stunned by her work at rehearsal. They had never seen her performing with so much confidence, spontaneity, intuition, vision.

Extending the sense of self is not the same thing as seership, of course, but I believe that it is part of that process, a small glimpse into the inner world of Thorbiorg. A small step backwards in time, towards the experiential world of our indigenous ancestors.